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Thich Nhat Hanh

INTRODUCTION BY ELAINE PAGELS

FOREWORD BY

BROTHER DAVID STEINDL-RAST, O.S.B.

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Transformation and Healing

Riverhead Books, New York

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FOREWORD



Twice in this book Thich Nhat Hanh puts before us a powerful image of Christian legend: In midwinter, St. Francis is calling out to an almond tree, “Speak to me of God!” and the almond tree breaks into bloom. *It comes alive*. There is no other way of witnessing to God but by aliveness. With a fine instinct, Thich Nhat Hanh traces genuine aliveness to its source. He recognizes that this is what the biblical tradition calls the Holy Spirit. After all, the very word “spirit” means “breath,” and to breathe means to live. The Holy Spirit is the breath of divine life.

This conjures up the Bible story of creation: In the beginning, the Spirit of God—always feminine in the Bible—hovers like a mother bird over the lifeless chaos, brooding and bringing forth life in all its forms and degrees. “For the Spirit of the Lord fills the whole universe and holds all things together ...” (Wisdom 1:7) At the end of this creation myth, we see God, in a touching image, breathe life into the nostrils of the still-lifeless human figure formed out of earth in God’s own image. And so we humans come alive. From the biblical perspective, there has never been a human being who is not alive with God’s own life breath.

We Christians have no monopoly on the Holy Spirit: “All those who are led by the Spirit of God are [daughters and] sons of God.” (Romans 8:14) No wonder, then, that a Buddhist who is not afraid of the pain it brings to be truly alive—birth pain, growing pain—should recognize the Holy Spirit as the ultimate source of all aliveness. “The Spirit blows where she wills.” (John 3:8) And no wonder that alive Christians recognize their sisters and brothers in the Holy Spirit anywhere.

“Nhat Hanh is my brother,” wrote Thomas Merton. “We are both monks, and we have lived the monastic life about the same number of years. We are both poets, both existentialists. I have far more in common with Nhat Hanh

than I have with many Americans.” That was written when the two peacemakers confronted together the catastrophe of the Vietnam War. It was at that time that I myself had the privilege of meeting Thich Nhat Hanh, known to friends and students as Thây (teacher), and I recognized in him a brother in the Spirit.

Great was my joy to find on the very first page of this book a reference to Thây’s sharing the Eucharist with Dan Berrigan. On one occasion, this took place in the small student’s room I occupied at Columbia University. As one of the sacred readings that evening, Thây recited the Heart Sutra, the most important Zen scripture, in Vietnamese. It was on April 4, 1968. How could I forget that date! Afterwards we went to listen to a lecture by Hans Küng, but the event was interrupted by the shattering news that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been assassinated.

The ritual we had celebrated earlier that evening had once again been reenacted in history: “Greater love no one has but to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:13) Jesus had done this 2,000 years ago; Martin had done it today; and Thây, in risking his own life to speak out uncompromisingly for peace in Vietnam, was allowing himself to walk in the same direction. “Nhat Hanh is a free man who has acted as a free man in favor of his brothers, moved by the spiritual dynamic of a tradition of religious compassion,” Thomas Merton wrote. “We cannot let him go back to Saigon to be destroyed while we sit here cherishing the warm humanitarian glow of good intentions and worthy sentiments.” In the end, Thây was spared. Although unable to return to Vietnam, he has lived in exile ever since. The roots of *Living Buddha, Living Christ* go back to that time when, in the face of death, human hearts were most alive.

“It is safer to approach God through the Holy Spirit than through theology,” Thây writes. And yet he is a theologian in the deepest sense: He speaks of God out of his own living experience. And he speaks with enthusiasm—with the voice of the divine Spirit in his own heart. If we listen attentively, we will hear traditional truths expressed in startling new ways. And we might be surprised by Thây’s sure sense for essentials. For

Christian readers, it would be a great loss to overlook this voice of insight and compassion, insisting instead on academic niceties and theological precision.

“Discussing God is not the best use of our energy,” Thich Nhat Hanh writes. “If we touch the Holy Spirit, we touch God not as a concept but as a living reality.” With a gentle but firm hand, this monk leads us again and again from theory to practice. He has deep respect for concepts, but as a means, not an end. The Zen tradition has developed a rich and nuanced terminology, but its emphasis on practice makes it less likely that one will get stuck in notions. Thây insists: “Reality is free from all notions.... It is our duty to transcend words and concepts to be able to encounter reality.”

He continues: “When we see someone overflowing with love and understanding, someone who is keenly aware of what is going on, we know that they are very close to the Buddha and to Jesus Christ.” How would you feel if you met a person like that? Overjoyed? Of course. Comfortable. Perhaps not. I have had the privilege of encountering men and women close to the living Buddha, the living Christ—some of them world-famous, others completely unknown; it makes no difference. Their very presence awakens us and challenges our complacency.

Reading *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, I felt the same challenge. I am not referring to the few passages that criticize Christian (or rather un-Christian) narrowness, exclusivism, or sexism. Any Christian who strives to follow Christ will have voiced those criticisms long ago and possibly less gently. The challenge I felt was personal. It came not from anything Thây said, but from his silence, from between the lines. I felt a bit like the almond tree confronted by St. Francis. “Start blooming, frozen Christian!” the mystic Angelus Silesius called out. “Springtime is at hand. When will you ever bloom if not here and now?” Thich Nhat Hanh’s words entered me like a Zen koan: Speak to me of the unspeakable, and not with words. “Speak to me of God!” This is the challenge Thich Nhat Hanh offers us: Come alive, truly alive!